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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001094

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM PTER LE SY FR

SUBJECT: COUSSERON ON LEBANON DIALOGUE INITIATIVE, REGIONAL
STOPS

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Meeting with the Ambassador on 7/24, French Special Envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran discussed follow-on to the dialogue in La Celle-St. Cloud and his regional visits. He said that, although he heard "nothing new" after a day in Beirut, he favored trying to keep a French-sponsored process alive until the dialogue could be handled by the Lebanese leaders themselves in Beirut. March 14 politicians favored a package (presidency, cabinet, and cabinet program), whereas March 8 politicians would discuss only a national unity government. Cousseran said that he was exploring whether the package favored by March 14 could be made attractive enough for March 8 politicians to consider. He did not express concern that Hizballah representatives had boycotted the dinner hosted by French Ambassador Bernard Emie.

¶2. (C) Cousseran said that his message last week to Damascus was blunt, noting that France's relationship with Syria would be based on the "exclusive test" of Syrian behavior toward Lebanon. He denied rumors circulating in Beirut that Iran had made specific demands regarding amending the Taif agreement, although the Iranians did muse about revisiting Taif. To his surprise, the Iranians introduced him to two Lebanese Hizballah officials in Teheran. Egypt pins great hope on the Arab League initiative, which Cousseran hoped would apply external pressure in favor of a Lebanese solution. Cousseran said that he was struck by the Saudi fear of Lebanon turning into another Gaza. The Saudis told Cousseran that the LAF will not be able to counter the number of terrorist organizations springing up on Lebanese soil and, thus, the French should be prepared to contribute troops to an international force to prevent a terrorist coup d'etat in Lebanon. As for the Swiss initiative, Cousseran was diplomatically positive, on the caveat that the Lebanese leaders keep their dialogue in Beirut. End summary.

MARCH 8-MARCH 14 DIVIDE UNBRIDGED

¶3. (C) French Special Envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran, accompanied by French Ambassador Bernard Emie, met with Ambassador Feltman on 7/24. He reported that, in 24 hours in Beirut -- including a dinner the previous night which all La Celle-St. Cloud participants except Hizballah representatives attended -- he had heard "nothing new." The divisions that

marked the conversations in France remain wide: March 14 representatives are willing to discuss a package to move Lebanon forward, by focusing on coming to simultaneous agreement on the presidency, a post-election national unity cabinet, and the post-election cabinet program. March 8 politicians will not budge, insisting that the only topic they will discuss is how to form a national unity cabinet now, as a "parachute" in case presidential elections do not happen. Cousseran was unconcerned that the Hizballah representatives did not attend the dinner. In downplaying rumors that Hizballah was boycotting the French initiative, Cousseran noted that he will see the two Hizballah representatives from France later today (7/24).

GOALS: MAKE THE PACKAGE MORE ATTRACTIVE;
KEEP THE PROCESS ALIVE

¶4. (C) Cousseran said that he was under no illusions about how unlikely it would be to have a political breakthrough, given the lack of good will between the two sides of Lebanon's political divide. Nevertheless, the French will look at how to make the "package" concept of March 14 attractive enough that the March 8 politicians will be seduced into discussing it. Cousseran said that France shared U.S. "red lines" (against Syrian interference, tampering with the Special Tribunal, etc.) and would not cross them in making suggestions regarding the March 14 package.

¶5. (C) In any case, Cousseran said, there was merit in simply keeping the French-sponsored process alive, in order to shame the Lebanese into keeping channels of communication open and to reduce tensions. He confirmed that French

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Foreign Minister Kouchner would be in Beirut this weekend (July 27-29 -- "three days!" moaned Emie). At this point, Cousseran did not know what the next step would be after Kouchner's trip. "We can't accept either side stopping the dialogue," Cousseran noted. "In a way, we are making it up as we go along," Emie said, "but the ultimate aim is to have the Lebanese re-adopt their own dialogue." Nodding, Cousseran said that he hoped the Lebanese leaders would agree to convene the National Dialogue again. "It was never our purpose to replace the National Dialogue," he said, explaining why the French have only invited the "second-tier" leaders to come to La Celle-St. Cloud and the French Residence.

SWISS, ARAB INITIATIVES

¶6. (C) Asked by Ambassador Feltman about the relationship between the French initiative and other international efforts, Cousseran said that he hoped that all would be complementary, with the similar goals of keeping tensions in check, opening channels of communication, and prodding the Lebanese leaders to re-start the National Dialogue in Beirut.

He said that, in his discussions with Swiss Special Envoy Didier Pfirter, he emphasized the value of the Swiss remaining focused on civil society contacts. He described the Swiss initiative as "impressive, ambitious." Ambassador Feltman noted that, as we understand Pfirter's ideas, the Swiss also seem to want to elevate the talks to a higher level, with a focus on political leaders. Nodding, Cousseran repeated his view that the Lebanese political leaders need to reconvene the National Dialogue in Beirut. (Comment: Pfirter is currently in Beirut. We will try to see him to explore current Swiss thinking, but we tend to agree with Cousseran: the international initiatives should not replace Lebanon's National Dialogue. End comment.)

¶7. (C) As for the Arab League initiative, Cousseran said that, "speaking candidly," he was not entirely certain what it was or where it was going. Egypt in particular puts a lot

of stock in the potential success of the Arab League initiative, and Cousseran welcomed a strong Arab role. While noting that he was not sure of the details, he hoped that Arab League pressure on external players would help contribute to the atmosphere by which the National Dialogue would be resumed at the leadership level and in Beirut.

SYRIA: FRANCE WILL BASE
RELATIONSHIP ON TREATMENT OF LEBANON

¶ 8. (C) Cousseran reported that, in visiting Damascus the previous week, he had a "simple, clear, two-part mission." First, he was instructed to report on La Celle-St. Cloud. "I told the Syrians, 'we are informing you, not involving you.'" He said that he emphasized the point that the French had gathered genuine Lebanese political figures together, for genuine Lebanese talks, to cut off any claims by the Syrians that the March 14 politicians are unrepresentative of Lebanon.

¶ 9. (C) Second, Cousseran told the Syrians, "we know what you're doing in Lebanon. We see what you are doing in Lebanon. We view what you are doing in Lebanon as fully negative, harmful, and dangerous. We -- Cousseran searched for a word momentarily -- hate what you are doing." Cousseran said that he told the Syrians that the "exclusive test" by which France would judge its relationship with Syria is Lebanon. If Syrian attitudes improve, then the French will react accordingly. If not, then French policy will remain "firm." Emie asked Cousseran whether he had mentioned the possibility of sanctions. Cousseran responded that he did not say the word "sanctions" but described the French reaction to continued Syrian mischief in Lebanon as a policy of "Chirac-plus. They understood the message."

¶ 10. (C) Answering Ambassador Feltman, Cousseran said that he had not given the Syrians any examples of the sort of behavior France would like to see Syria adopt vis-a-vis Lebanon. He was under strict instructions not to get into any kind of negotiating message or give the Syrians the opportunity to parse or dilute the message. With the exception of lengthy discourses about the sins of the United States and all that Syria is doing to stop terrorism

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(reportedly arresting 1500 cross-border infiltrators in seven months, 60 percent of whom originated in Saudi Arabia), the Syrians "had nothing to say of substance." On atmosphere, Cousseran said that, when he arrived, he was "greeted like an old friend," but Foreign Minister Walid Mu'allim and Vice President Farouq ash-Shara were clearly disappointed to have their theory that French policy was softening "demolished so thoroughly by their old friend."

SAUDI ARABIA: FEARFUL OF LEBANON
BECOMING "ANOTHER GAZA"

¶ 11. (C) Cousseran said that there was nothing surprising in his discussions in Egypt, with the Egyptians unhappy with the Syrians and hopeful that Arab League diplomacy might affect Syrian behavior. By contrast, Cousseran said that he was astonished by his discussions in Saudi Arabia. His unidentified Saudi interlocutors preached gloom and doom about Lebanon, using Fatah al-Islam as an example of what's in store in the near term. The Saudis predicted that, without help, Lebanon will soon become another Gaza, with terrorist organizations imposing a coup d'etat that dissolves what's left of the state. The Saudis were not comforted by the LAF's surprisingly good performance and determination in Nahr al-Barid, for they believe that Syria will spark multiple clashes soon that the LAF will be unable to check. In fact, Syria may be using Nahr al-Barid to exhaust the LAF.

¶ 12. (C) To counter what they described as a dangerous offensive that is Syrian in origin, the Saudis told Cousseran

that Lebanon needed international forces throughout the country, to preserve the state. France needed to play a leadership role in building and staffing this force. Cousseran said that he was "fully astonished" by this proposal and asked whether the Saudis had raised it with the United States. Cousseran wondered whether the Saudis "know something the rest of us do not," about the number and capabilities of the terrorists inside Lebanon. There was an alarming sense of urgency to the Saudi request regarding an international force, Cousseran noted.

IRAN: QUESTIONING TAIF,
BUT NOTHING SPECIFIC

¶13. (C) The Ambassador asked about Cousseran's two trips to Iran, noting that people are quoting Cousseran second-hand in saying that the Iranians want to change the Taif accord's 50-50 Christian-Muslim split to one of thirds, split evenly between Christians, Shia, and Sunnis. "That is an invention," Cousseran responded. After a brief pause, he said, "well, exaggeration more than invention." The Iranians, he said, asked candidly, "what about Taif? Isn't it time to look again at Taif?" Cousseran noted that the question can only be referred to the Lebanese, and the Iranians did not press specific proposals. "Taif is on their minds, but they did not give ideas of what they want." Cousseran said that what surprised him in Teheran was the moment when his interlocutors produced two Lebanese Hizballah representatives for him to meet: Nawaf Musawi (later part of Hizballah's delegation to La Celle-St. Cloud) and Hussein Hajj Hassan.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) Cousseran came across as sensible and realistic about the work-in-process French initiative. Nor did not seem starry-eyed about the Syrians. We liked Cousseran's basic principle of trying to revive the National Dialogue, and in a Lebanon venue. This is consistent with our policy that the Lebanese must be in charge of decisions regarding Lebanon, and it avoids a situation where it appears as though we're "internationalizing" the Lebanon issue in ways by which the Syrians and Iranians would press to be included, too. We also know that March 14 leaders are ready today to sit down again around the National Dialogue table to discuss a package of initiatives that will move Lebanon forward. It is the March 8 leaders who refuse. Their refusal to embrace a French initiative will not go unnoticed by the French officials, whom Emie notes are still reviewing France's Lebanon policy in light of the new French administration. We

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also note that Cousseran, in his 45-minute read-out with the Ambassador, did not distinguish between the Syria-allied Shia parties of Hizballah and Amal and Michel Aoun's movement. It seems as though Cousseran, at least, has already linked Aoun with Syria's allies in Lebanon.

FELTMAN